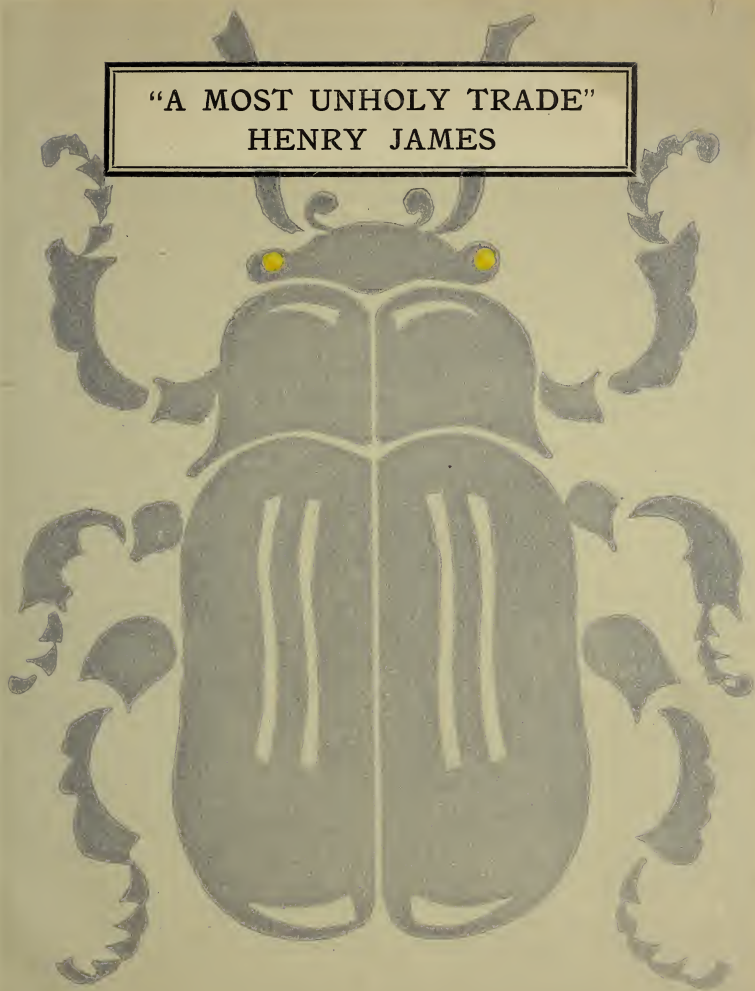


"A MOST UNHOLY TRADE"
HENRY JAMES



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"A MOST UNHOLY TRADE"



XX

**"A MOST UNHOLY TRADE"
BEING LETTERS ON THE
DRAMA BY HENRY JAMES**



**THE SCARAB PRESS
PRIVATELY PRINTED
MCMXXIII**

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N O T E

The four letters here printed for the first time are part of Henry James's informal correspondence with William Heinemann, the publisher. They are selected for their unity of subject, in that they concern themselves with James's impressions of Ibsen's "Little Eyolf" and contain some general remarks on the drama. Written about the time of the publication of the first and second series of James's *Theatricals*, they indicate his ideas at the time when his consideration of the subject was most intense. Acknowledgment is made to Mrs. J. Tucker Murray and to Pierre de Chaignon la Rose, Esq., for permission to print two of these letters.

"A MOST UNHOLY TRADE"

Wednesday
34, De Vere Gardens. W.

My dear Heinemann,

I feel as if I couldn't thank you enough for introducing me to Ibsen's prodigious little performance! I return it to you, by the same post conscientiously after two breathless perusals, — which leave me with a yearning as impatient, an appetite as hungry, for the rest, as poor Rita's yearning & appetite are for the missing caresses of her Alfred. Do satisfy me better or more promptly than he satisfied her. The thing is immensely characteristic & immensely — immense. I quite agree with you that it takes hold as nothing else

of his has as yet done — it appeals with an immoderate intensity & goes straight as a dose of castor oil! I hope to heaven the thing will reach the London stage: there ought to be no difficulty, if Rita, when she offers herself, can be restricted to a chair, instead of lying on her back on the sofa. Let her sit, and the objection vanishes — I mean let her eschew the sofa. Of course I don't know what the rest brings forth — but this act & a half are a pure — or an impure — perfection. If he really carries on the whole play simply with these four people — & at the same high pitch (it's the pitch that's so magnificent!) it will be a feat more extraordinary than any he's achieved — it will beat "Ghosts." Admirable, gallant old man! The success of this would be high! I greatly enjoyed

our "lovely luxurious" (as Rita wd. say),
fin de soirée, on Monday. Tree is as
dewily infantine as Eyolf!

Yours truly,

Henry James

P.S. Do remember that I'm on the sofa,
with my hair down — and pink lamp
shades!



34, De Vere Gardens, W.
November 22nd, 1894.

My dear Heinemann,

All thanks for your prompt and
adequate relief — the last "go" at Act II.
It is a very great little affair. If Act III
doesn't drop, it will be Ibsen's crown of
glory — I mean the whole thing will. It

is a little masterpiece. It seems to me that he doesn't make quite enough — (in form, in the pause to take it in, and the indication of the amazement and emotion of Allmers) — of the revelation of the non-relationship; but that is a detail, and the stroke itself — coming where it does — immense. The thing must and can be represented. This Act 2 is such a crescendo on 1. that if 3 is an equal crescendo on 2, the fortune of the thing will be made, and it will be a big fortune. I hope 3 is already on the stocks of translation. It's a fine case for the British manager's fine old demand for a "happy ending!" What I seem dimly to divine is that the she-Eyolf goes the same way as the He! i. e. the way of the fiord.

I don't see what complete tragedy

there is for it but that. But the Devil knows what queer card the old Roué has up his sleeve! — Perhaps Rita “has” the roadmaster publicly on the stage, while Asta throws herself into the fiord. Yes, Eyolf No. 2 does by design what Eyolf No. 1 did by accident — and does it conjointly with Alfred (at the risk of repeating Rosmersholm and Hedda and the Wild Duck), while Rita falls upon Borgheim and the Rat wife returns leading in a wild dance of rodents! That, at least, is the way it should be. But come to my aid! I was so full of it yesterday that, being near you, I popped in—tho’ I had already written, but only missed you.

Yours ever,

H. J.

Nov. 28th. 1894.
34, De Vere Gardens. W.

Dear Mr. Pawling,

Many thanks for your missive of yesterday & the message from the publisher-dramatist, whose friendly thought of sending me the play I much appreciate. I have read it, and, having done so, feel that such reflections as it may have engendered had better be imparted to Heinemann directly. Therefore I will write to him by the time he shall have returned from Manchester — & I will in returning him the sheets also send back the 3d. act of Ibsen, which I ought already to have restored & of which I spoke perhaps a little too despairingly on Sunday night at Gosse's. On reading it over more deliberately the next

day, I saw more its great intention of beauty. It is meagre & inconclusive, I think; but none the less I can imagine that, played with some real effort — & in a scenic Scandinavian twilight, it may have a certain fine solemnity & poetry of effect.

Yours very truly
Henry James



34, De Vere Gardens. W.
November 30th, 1894.

My dear Heinemann,

All thanks for the privilege of perusal — which I greatly appreciate. I applaud the boldness with which you

attack de front all the difficulties of the damnable little art, and which ought to bring you all honour. It is refreshingly courageous of you, for example, to have staked your fortune on a *dramatis personae* of 3, when you might, like H.A. Jones, have sought safety in 30 or so. I think the idea of the First Step interesting — the situation of the girl who has become a man's mistress, but rises in arms at the idea that her sister should do so — but I am not certain that it stands forth, as the subject, with that big dotting of the big i, that the barbarous art of the actable drama requires. In that art one must specify one's subject as unmistakeably as one orders one's dinner — I mean leave the audience no trouble to disengage or disentangle it. Forget not that you write for the

stupid — that is, that your maximum of refinement must meet the minimum of intelligence of the audience — the intelligence, in other words, of the biggest ass it may conceivably contain. It is a most unholy trade! But you are very brave and gay and easy with it. You have attempted a tour de force in trying to carry on 2 acts with only three people (I can think of no other case but Maupassant's Paix du Ménage — performed at the Français after his death by Bartet, Le Bargy & Worms), and with only one question, as it were, to create in the bosom of the spectator that principle of suspense which is the essence of the function of a theatrical action — the suspense as to whether or no, and how, by what means or by what catastrophe, a certain thing will

happen or fail. The particular thing, in the First Step, is the fate of the young sister's chastity, the "question" whether or no Annie shall lose her or save her. It is interesting but I am not sure it fills the play enough — and whether in your very laudable desire to be unconventional and real you haven't simplified too much. However, this will show in the test — though I pity you for the ordeal of interpretation. I can't help wishing Annie were rather worse herself, for the dramatic effect of the contrast between her own life and character and her intensity about the other girl; in other words, I think you have made her too good and the man she lives with too bad. The situation would have had a fuller force if his entanglement

with the actress had been more represented — so that (with the actress introduced) the action would have been closer and the effect of the circumstances leading Frank to sacrifice the girl more pictured, more dramatic. Excuse this preachment. I didn't mean to pick holes in your so serious and honourable attempt — but only to show you with what care I have read it and how much it has made me reflect!

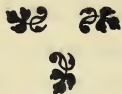
I owe you also long-delayed thanks for the Ibsen — I mean Act III, which I also return. It is a great — a very great drop; but it has distinct beauty and it could, in representation, I think be made fine.

All success to your own tragic Muse. She is evidently much in earnest and

she is altogether in the movement. Do take with her also, after this, another turn.

Yours ever, my dear Heinemann,
Henry James.

P.S. I long to hear about Manchester.



Of this, the first book printed by The Scarab Press, one hundred copies are for sale at Dunster House, 26 Holyoke Street & Mt. Auburn, Cambridge, Massachusetts. 🌿 The frontispiece was engraved on wood by Waldo Murray of Cambridge, after a drawing by John S. Sargent inscribed to his friend Henry James and published in The Yellow Book, 1894. 🌿 The cover was designed by Waldo Murray and also cut by him on linoleum.



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